

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
DALLAS DIVISION**

CORTEZ DEON ELIE, # 15059686,)
Plaintiff,)
vs.) **No. 3:16-CV-2032-L-BH**
)
GEORGE ASHFORD, III, et al.,)
Defendants.) **Referred to U.S. Magistrate Judge**

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION

Pursuant to *Special Order No. 3-251*, this case has been automatically referred for judicial screening. Based on the relevant filings and applicable law, the plaintiff's complaint should be **DISMISSED with prejudice**.

I. BACKGROUND

Cortez Deon Elie (Plaintiff) brings suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against his attorney in a state criminal case and the presiding state district judge. (doc. 3.) He claims that he has been detained since October 28, 2015, for an alleged robbery, but his attorney “has not provided adequate aid,” and the judge has failed to take any action. (*Id* at 3-4, 6.) He wants “the court to step in” on his state case and provide him “the proper legal aid that [he] need[s] in order to be released.” (*Id.* at 4.) No process has been issued in this case.

II. PRELIMINARY SCREENING

Plaintiff is a prisoner who has been permitted to proceed *in forma pauperis*. Because he is a prisoner seeking redress from an officer or employee of a governmental entity, his complaint is subject to preliminary screening pursuant to the Prison Litigation Reform Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1915A. *See Martin v. Scott*, 156 F.3d 578, 579-80 (5th Cir. 1998) (per curiam). Because he is proceeding *in forma pauperis*, his complaint is also subject to screening under § 1915(e)(2). Both § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b) provide for *sua sponte* dismissal of the complaint, or any

portion thereof, if the Court finds it is frivolous or malicious, if it fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or if it seeks monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such relief.

A complaint is frivolous when it “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.”

Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989). A claim lacks an arguable basis in law when it is “based on an indisputably meritless legal theory.” *Id.* at 327. A complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted when it fails to plead “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007); *accord Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. 1937, 1949 (2009). To avoid dismissal for failure to state a claim, plaintiffs must allege facts sufficient to “raise the right to relief above the speculative level.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555. Mere “labels and conclusions” nor “a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action” suffice to state a claim upon which relief may be granted. *Id.*

III. SECTION 1983

Plaintiff sues under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. It “provides a federal cause of action for the deprivation, under color of law, of a citizen’s ‘rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws’ of the United States.” *Livadas v. Bradshaw*, 512 U.S. 107, 132 (1994). To state a § 1983 claim, Plaintiff must allege facts that show (1) he has been deprived of a right secured by the Constitution and the laws of the United States and (2) the deprivation occurred under color of state law. *See Flagg Bros., Inc. v. Brooks*, 436 U.S. 149, 155 (1978); *Cornish v. Corr. Servs. Corp.*, 402 F.3d 545, 549 (5th Cir. 2005).

A. Claims for Habeas Relief

To the extent Plaintiff seeks release from imprisonment, this is an inappropriate remedy

in a § 1983 action. *See Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U.S. 539, 554 (1974). A prisoner cannot challenge the fact or duration of confinement in a § 1983 action. *Clarke v. Stalder*, 154 F.3d 186, 189 (5th Cir. 1998) (citing *Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 487 (1973)). He may only do so within the exclusive scope of habeas corpus. *See Preiser*, 411 U.S. at 487. Because Plaintiff may only obtain declaratory or monetary relief in this § 1983 action, he fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted on any claim for release.

B. Claims Against Attorney

Plaintiff sues the attorney representing him in a state criminal proceeding. (doc. 3 at 3-4.) It is well-established that an appointed attorney does not act under color of state law in representing a defendant at trial or on direct appeal. *See Polk County v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 325 (1981) (holding that “a public defender does not act under color of state law when performing a lawyer’s traditional functions as counsel to a defendant in a criminal proceeding); *Mills v. Crim. Dist. Ct. No. 3*, 837 F.2d 677, 679 (5th Cir. 1988) (holding that “private attorneys, even court-appointed attorneys, are not official state actors, and generally are not subject to suit under section 1983”). A private party may be acting “under color of state law” and be held liable under § 1983 in certain circumstances, however. *See Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co.*, 398 U.S. 144, 152 (1970); *Wong v. Stripling*, 881 F.2d 200, 202 (5th Cir. 1989).

Here, Plaintiff has not alleged that his attorney was acting as a state actor; he only complains about the handling of his criminal case. He has failed to state a viable, non-frivolous § 1983 claim, and the claim against his attorney should be dismissed.

C. Claims Against Judge

Plaintiff sues the judge presiding over his state criminal proceeding. (doc. 3 at 3-4.)

1. *Official Capacity*

To the extent that Plaintiff sues the judge in her official capacity, an official capacity claim is merely another way of pleading an action against the entity of which the individual defendant is an agent. *See Kentucky v. Graham*, 473 U.S. 159, 165 (1985). Plaintiff's suit against a Texas state judge in her official capacity is a suit against the State of Texas. The Eleventh Amendment states that “[t]he Judicial power of the United States shall not be construed to extend to any suit in law or equity, commenced or prosecuted against one of the United States by Citizens of another State, or by Citizens or Subjects of any Foreign State.” “This withdrawal of jurisdiction effectively confers an immunity from suit.” *P.R. Aqueduct & Sewer Auth. v. Metcalf & Eddy, Inc.*, 506 U.S. 139, 144 (1993). Therefore, “an unconsenting State is immune from suits brought in federal courts by her own citizens as well as by citizens of another State.” *Edelman v. Jordan*, 415 U.S. 651, 663 (1974). Although Congress has the power to abrogate that immunity through the Fourteenth Amendment, *Kimel v. Fla. Bd. of Regents*, 528 U.S. 62, 72-76 (2000), and the State may waive its immunity by consenting to suit, *AT&T Communic'ns v. BellSouth Telecomms. Inc.*, 238 F.3d 636, 643 (5th Cir. 2001), the State has not waived its immunity by consenting to suit, nor has Congress abrogated the Eleventh Amendment immunity by enacting 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *See Will v. Mich. Dep't of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 71 (1989). The judge has Eleventh Amendment immunity for any claims asserted against her in her official capacity. *Warnock v. Pecos County, Tex.*, 88 F.3d 341, 343 (5th Cir. 1996).

2. *Individual Capacity*

To the extent that Plaintiff sues the judge in her individual capacity, the Supreme Court

has recognized absolute immunity for judges acting in the performance of their judicial duties.

See Nixon v. Fitzgerald, 457 U.S. 731, 745–46 (1982). Judges are immune from suit for damages resulting from any judicial act unless performed in “the clear absence of all jurisdiction.” *Mireles v. Waco*, 502 U.S. 9, 11-12 (1991). Allegations of bad faith or malice do not overcome judicial immunity. *Id.* at 11. Because Plaintiff has not alleged that the judge acted without jurisdiction, and his complaint is based solely on acts or omissions in her role as a judge, the judge is absolutely immune from any claims against her for monetary damages. *See Nixon*, 457 U.S. at 745–46.

To the extent Plaintiff is seeking some type of injunctive relief against the judge, §1983 expressly provides “in any action brought against a judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer’s official capacity, injunctive relief shall not be granted unless a declaratory decree was violated or declaratory relief is unavailable.” 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Plaintiff has made no such allegations to support any § 1983 claims based on the alleged failure to act on his motions or allegations. *See generally Knight v. 24th Judicial Dist. Court Section A*, No. 06-4537, 2006 WL 4017837, at *2-3 (E.D. La. Oct. 17, 2006), *recommendation adopted* (Dec. 5, 2006) (“A criminal defendant prejudiced by misconduct of a presiding judge finds relief not by bringing a federal lawsuit pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, but rather by availing himself of state procedures for a change of venue or recusal of a judge, seeking review of any resulting conviction through direct appeal or post-conviction collateral review, and filing a petition for federal habeas corpus relief in appropriate circumstances”) (citing *O’Shea v. Littleton*, 414 U.S.

488, 502 (1974)).¹ The judge therefore also has judicial immunity from any claims against her for injunctive relief. *See Green v. Mayfield*, No. 3:08-CV-2287-L, 2009 WL 230161, at * 2 (N.D. Tex. Jan. 29, 2009).

III. RECOMMENDATION

Plaintiff's claims should be **DISMISSED WITH PREJUDICE** pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A(b). This dismissal will count as a "strike" or "prior occasion" within the meaning 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).²

SO RECOMMENDED this 14th day of July, 2016.



IRMA CARRILLO RAMIREZ
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

¹ In addition, under the *Younger* abstention doctrine, a federal court should not interfere with ongoing state criminal proceedings except under extraordinary circumstances not shown here. *See Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37, 49-52 (1971); *see also Louisiana Deb. and Lit. Ass'n v. City of New Orleans*, 42 F.3d 1483, 1489-1490 (5th Cir.), *cert. denied*, 515 U.S. 1145 (1995). Abstention is required under the *Younger* doctrine when: (1) state proceedings, judicial in nature, are pending; (2) the state proceedings involve important state interests; and (3) the state proceedings afford adequate opportunity to raise the constitutional challenges. *See Middlesex County Ethics Comm. v. Garden State Bar Ass'n*, 457 U.S. 423, 432 (1982).

² Section 1915(g), which is commonly known as the "three-strikes" provision, provides:

In no event shall a prisoner bring a civil action or appeal a judgment in a civil action or proceeding under this section, if the prisoner has, on 3 or more prior occasions, while incarcerated or detained in any facility, brought an action or appeal in a court of the United States that was dismissed on the grounds that it is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, unless the prisoner is under imminent danger of serious physical injury.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR SERVICE AND
NOTICE OF RIGHT TO APPEAL/OBJECT**

A copy of these findings, conclusions and recommendation shall be served on all parties in the manner provided by law. Any party who objects to any part of these findings, conclusions and recommendation must file specific written objections within 14 days after being served with a copy. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b). In order to be specific, an objection must identify the specific finding or recommendation to which objection is made, state the basis for the objection, and specify the place in the magistrate judge's findings, conclusions and recommendation where the disputed determination is found. An objection that merely incorporates by reference or refers to the briefing before the magistrate judge is not specific. Failure to file specific written objections will bar the aggrieved party from appealing the factual findings and legal conclusions of the magistrate judge that are accepted or adopted by the district court, except upon grounds of plain error. *See Douglass v. United Servs. Automobile Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996).


IRMA CARRILLO RAMIREZ
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE